

September 10, 2009 - Pelosi: Upping Troops to Afghanistan Unpopular

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Pelosi: Upping troops to Afghanistan unpopular

By LARA JAKES (AP)

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WASHINGTON — House Speaker

Nancy Pelosi said Thursday she sees little support for sending more U.S. troops to Afghanistan, forecasting a potential showdown with the Obama administration over how to win the war.

Pelosi's comments put President Barack Obama in an uneasy position as he considers whether to side with his top commander in Afghanistan, who is expected in coming weeks to ask for more troops and other resources.

She is the highest-ranking Democrat to signal that any White House or Pentagon push for more troops will be resisted in Congress.

"I don't think there's a great deal of support for sending more troops to Afghanistan in the country or in the Congress," Pelosi, D-Calif., told reporters.

Rep. John P. Murtha, chairman of a House Appropriations panel that would approve paying for any buildup, described himself as "very nervous" about sending more troops to Afghanistan.

Murtha, D-Pa., a Marine veteran, said Thursday he might support it if the Obama administration withdraws a significant number of soldiers from Iraq in the very near future.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, meanwhile, said he is urging Democrats to withhold judgment until Obama decides what to do.

"Let's just take it easy," Reid, D-Nev., told reporters. "I don't think we need 100 secretaries of state. I think we should wait and give the president an opportunity to see what he recommends, and then we can dissect that any way we want."

Pelosi said she has not yet seen an on-the-ground assessment of the military situation in Afghanistan that was delivered last week to the White House. The assessment, by Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, does not specifically ask for more troops. But a follow-up report expected in coming weeks is widely expected to.

A briefing on the classified report's conclusions was tentatively planned for this week, according to Capitol Hill aides. Pelosi, however, said she had not yet been briefed and believed she would not be until next week.

Earlier this year, Obama ordered 21,000 more troops to Afghanistan, which would bring the total number of U.S. forces there to 68,000 by the end of 2009.

In interviews this week, lawmakers said they wanted to see strong evidence that ordering thousands more troops to the war-torn nation would dislodge insurgents from safe havens in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan.

Opposition so far appears stronger among House Democratic leaders than their Senate counterparts.

"I'm very hesitant to endorse additional troops," Murtha said. "We don't have the financial resources to sustain one long deployment, let alone two. ... There's so much consternation in Congress about additional troops, especially without (seeing) a plan. It's going to come to a head here."

There are about 130,000 U.S. troops still in Iraq.

The issue of adding more troops in Afghanistan has divided both parties. Though some Republicans also are wary of a buildup, the GOP leader on the House Armed Services committee warned that without more troops, the U.S. mission easily could be lost.

"Narrowing the effort in Afghanistan or withholding vital resources from our troops and diplomats would be a major error, guarantee continued stalemate, and could eventually lead to defeat," said Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif.

White House officials are working to enlist congressional support for the fighting in Afghanistan, which in August saw its bloodiest month for U.S. troops since invading in October 2001. Fifty-one U.S. troops died in Afghanistan last month.

Obama administration officials have asked lawmakers and staff to help draw up a list of about 50 benchmarks that the government wants to use in determining whether U.S. strategy in the region is working. That list is due Sept. 24.

Pelosi said she was "more interested" in that assessment than the McChrystal report that went to the White House last week. "September 24th is fraught with meaning for us," she said.

As Obama considers the McChrystal report, Defense Secretary Robert Gates planned to give him two more takes on its conclusions, from Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen and U.S. Central Command Gen. David Petraeus. Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell said those assessments would be delivered later this week.

Government officials have said a final decision on whether to send more troops to Afghanistan likely would not come for several more weeks.